

Digital Literacies

Constructing Digital Learning Commons in the Literacy Classroom

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The increased classroom use of digital tools—blogs, wikis, podcasts, online chat, and social networking—is redefining how people are acquiring and sharing information, as well as redefining what it means to be literate. Amidst the celebratory rhetoric around uses of these tools, there remains a need to rethink familiar perspectives on classroom learning.

One concept for such rethinking involves the idea of the “learning commons” (Koechlin, Luhtala, & Loertscher, 2011). The concept of the “commons,” which was initially derived from the idea of public places, has also come to mean publically shared knowledge (Hess & Ostrom, 2007). Central to the concept of a public commons is that its members perceive themselves as contributing something of value to the larger “common good.”

K–12 media specialists are currently redefining the mission of media centers around the concept of the learning commons based on the idea of collaborative, inquiry-based learning activities that are jointly planned by media specialists and teachers. The learning commons concept is manifested through creation of “knowledge building centers” constituted as inquiry-based “collaborative construction zones” (Koechlin, Luhtala, & Loertscher, 2011; www.schoollearningcommons.info/home).

Redefining the literary classroom as a learning commons means that students, teachers, administrators, experts, and parents become colearners who collaboratively share and construct knowledge in ways that contribute to the “common good” both inside and outside the classroom.

Uses of Web 2.0 Tools in the Digital Learning Commons

The idea of a digital learning commons builds on the use of digital tools to acquire and share information through participation in knowledge building centers mediated by the use of Web 2.0 tools. Using Web 2.0 tools enhances the level of crowd-sourcing participation, as evident in, for example, the sharing of information associated with the “Arab Spring” protests on Twitter and Facebook.

Such participation is enhanced when users perceive the value of their contributions for other members. For example, in the OneVille project (oneville.org) organized by Mica Pollock (2011), teachers, peers, counselors, experts, administrators, and parents perceived the value of connecting with students through texting and e-portfolios.

Analysis of texting between teachers and students regarding their work (oneville.org/research-day-exploring-the-potential-of-texting-for-student-

teacher-communication) provided students with a sense that their teachers cared about them (Pollock, 2011). Also, high school students participating in an online role-play perceived the value of sharing information about the legal and social aspects related to their school's policy of blocking websites. This led to their formulation of arguments that the school administration should unblock the sites, which the administration agreed to do (Doerr-Stevens, Beach, & Boeser, 2011).

Through collaboratively sharing knowledge, students also recognize the value and importance of adopting different perspectives. By participating in global, digital learning commons, users experience cross-cultural perspectives involving "cosmopolitan habits of mind"—the ability to recognize and negotiate differences between competing global cultural perspectives (Hull, Stornaiuolo, & Sahni, 2010).

Digital Annotation Tools

In the reading realm, the practice of coconstructing digital commonplace texts is a key aspect of engaging in a digital learning commons. The idea of commonplace text derives from the commonplace book, a genre that started in the 5th century when authors kept commonplace books as scrapbooks by transcribing quotes or keeping annotations as summary and critical reflection on ideas in books.

The idea of the commonplace book can then be applied to the digital learning commons in which users add digital annotations to texts, transforming reading of "booklogs" into a "community event, with every isolated paragraph [serving as] the launching pad for a conversation with strangers around the world" (Johnson, 2009, p. 3).

In applying digital annotations to texts, students contribute to the learning commons by rewriting texts through forwarding, borrowing, or authorizing ideas and positions in a text, and extending these ideas and positions by framing them in their own words or adopting an alternative perspective (Harris, 2006, pp. 38–39).

Students can employ digital annotation tools such as the Kindle app (kindle.amazon.com) to highlight passages in e-books and add annotations or export their passages and annotations to create "public

notes" to be shared on sites such as Evernote (www.evernote.com). Students can also upload PDF versions of their textbooks onto an iPad and then add and share annotations using iAnnotate PDF (www.ajidev.com/apps.html) or Goodreader (www.goodreader.net).

For collaboratively adding annotations to digital texts/websites, students and teachers can employ social bookmarking/annotation tools such as

- Diigo (www.diigo.com)
- Reframe It (reframeit.com)
- Trailfire (trailfire.com/pages/download.php)
- Evernote (www.evernote.com)
- Highlighter (highlighter.com)

For example, teachers can use Diigo to set up special educator accounts (www.diigo.com/education), adding students to a class "group" account along with privacy settings for sharing of bookmarks of websites relevant to topics or issues of interest to the class. Students can then add annotations to any sites or blog posts to share as e-mails with their entire class or with subgroups within a class.

In using Diigo, students first highlight a section of a text, adding a "sticky note" annotation that pops up when others click on the "sticky note" icon. Students can then share their small-group responses to online texts, for example, poems from the Academy of American Poets (www.poets.org) or Poetry Archives (www.poetryarchive.org).

Students can also share their annotations to images or videos. One easy-to-use tool for adding annotations to images and video is VoiceThread (www.voicethread.com) in which multiple users share oral or written annotations to the same images or video clips (see www.voicethread.com/library/10). Students can also add annotations to videos using VideoAnt (ant.umn.edu) or YouTube videos by selecting the "Edit Annotations" option in the annotations panel to the left of the YouTube video viewer.

In creating these annotations, students often need assistance in going beyond simply restating or summarizing content in order that they formulate their own engagement responses, intertextual connections, interpretations, judgments, or contextualizing material related to their purposes for studying a topic or issue.

Collaborative Writing Tools

Students and teachers also use collaborative writing tools such as class blogs and wikis to create shared texts, constituting work in a learning commons. For example, each new group of first-year composition students at St. Cloud State University contribute to the *Rhetoric and Composition* wikibook (en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Rhetoric_and_Composition) to create an evolving repository about learning college writing.

Scott Wertsch, an English teacher at Champlin Park High School in Minnesota, set up a wiki to have students

working in book clubs to share their responses to novels (wertsch.pbworks.com/Spring-2009-Book-Club-Wiki-Pages; Beach, Anson, Kastman-Breuch, & Swiss, 2009). Students can also create entries for, or revise entries on, *Wikipedia*, the prototypical digital commonplace text.

And, despite being blocked in many schools, teachers are increasingly employing Facebook and Twitter for academic purposes of sharing knowledge. Literacy teachers can participate in professional learning networks (PLNs) as digital learning commons for sharing ideas and resources (see Table for a helpful list of collaborative writing and professional literacy network tools.)

Table Collaborative Writing and Professional Learning Network Tools

Tools	Resources
For collaboratively constructing writing	Google Docs (docs.google.com) Zoho Writer (writer.zoho.com) Adobe Buzzword (www.adobe.com/acom/buzzword) TypeWith.me (typewith.me) Mendeley (www.mendeley.com)
For publically sharing notes in response to presentations, videos, or discussions	Twitter (twitter.com) TodaysMeet (www.todaysmeet.com) SoapBox (gosoapbox.com) Notepad (www.Notepad.cc) WallWisher (www.wallwisher.com)
For sharing and commenting on fiction writing	Fanfiction (www.fanfiction.net) Inkpop (www.inkpop.com) Pulse It (pulseit.simonandschuster.com) Wattpad (www.wattpad.com)
For creating multimedia books or curations of news stories	Sophie (www.sophieproject.org) Bookbuilder (bookbuilder.cast.org) Storify (storify.com)
For professional organizations' resources	IRA's Engage (engage.reading.org) NCTE's Connected Community (for NCTE members: ncte.connectedcommunity.org)
For sharing teaching ideas	English Companion Ning (englishcompanion.ning.com) National Writing Project Connect (connect.nwp.org) #EngChat (www.engchat.org)
For sharing ideas for use of Web 2.0 tools	Classroom 2.0 (www.classroom20.com) Digital Is (digitalis.nwp.org)
For sharing lesson plans	ReadWriteThink (www.readwritethink.org) Sophia (www.sophia.org) Curriki (www.curriki.org)

Using Digital Tools to Construct a Learning Commons

Redefining the literary classroom as a learning commons means that students, teachers, peers, counselors, experts, administrators, and parents are learning to use digital annotation, collaborative writing/discussion, or professional learning network tools for a collaborative, crowd-sourcing construction of knowledge that can redefine the boundaries of the classroom. Learning how to participate in the learning commons to share ideas and alternative perspectives for addressing problems leading to change is an essential 21st-century digital literacy.

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